

Politics and Human Rights in Slovakia



Government

- Parliamentary democracy – 150 member National Council (Narodna Rada)
- President (head of state) – Ivan Gasparovic
 - Reelected for 5 year term in 2009
- Prime Minister – Robert Fico
 - elected for 4 year term in 2006
- Coalition government
 - 3 parties, 3 parties in opposition
 - SNS (Slovak National Party) – member of coalition
 - elements of nationalism, anti-Semitism, etc.

Human Rights Problems

- Corruption in judiciary
- Restrictions of media freedoms
- Trafficking in women and children
- Extremism
- Restriction of religious freedoms
- Societal discrimination/violence against Roma and other minorities

Judiciary

- Stefan Harabin
 - President of Supreme Court, former Minister of Justice
- Consolidation of power, exploitation of office
 - Was formerly on Supreme Court, then became Justice Minister
 - While Justice Minister, Harabin shifted responsibilities within the Supreme Court to consolidate power within the Presidency
 - Assumed Presidency in 2009 despite ineligibility (having previously served on Supreme Court)
- Corruption – bribery, intimidation
 - Business connections to known narcotics trafficker

Judiciary

- Intimidation and exploitation of judges by judges
 - Abuse of disciplinary proceedings
 - Expressing concern about corrupt practices
 - Penalized for opinions
 - Pressure to support legal complaints against other judges
 - Resulting in suspension/loss of position
- What is the result?
 - An internally corrupt judiciary that is ruled by fear
 - Ethical judges systematically rooted out

Judiciary

- Police corruption
- Bribes, abuse of power, and impunity
 - ex: Radoslav Puky 2004, disappeared during a police operation, body found in a canal
 - Despite evidence of police brutality, none of the officers involved were charged or disciplined.

Media freedoms

- June 2008 – Media law
 - A new media law went into effect that requires newspapers to print responses to “any statement of fact that impinges on the honor, dignity, or privacy of a natural person, or the name or good reputation of a legal entity.”
- Problematic because it could force publishers to print official government responses
 - Regardless of factual information
 - Enables government influence over media

Media freedoms

- Civil defamation (libel) lawsuits against media
- Members of government and political elites use lawsuits and threats to limit negative reports about the government.
- Politicians publicly attack media outlets and journalists
 - Prime Minister Fico: journalists are “slimy snakes” and “idiots”

Media freedoms

- Radio Viva – 2004
 - Slovak judge, charges of fraud
 - Report based on factual information provided at an Interior Ministry press conference
 - Ordered to pay 30,000 Euros
- Stefan Harabin – 2009
 - Various lawsuits against various news agencies currently pending
 - August 2009 – Harabin sent letters to 4 newspapers asking for 200,000 Euros in out-of-court settlements for reporting “slanderous” information
- Can cause self-censorship in the media

Trafficking in Women and Children – Modern day slavery

- Trafficking: illegal trade of persons
- How they are exploited:
 - Often recruited using deception, coercion
 - Sometimes kidnapped
 - Usually forced into prostitution, sex slavery
- Vulnerability of Central/Eastern Europe
 - Organized crime, political instability
 - Economic problems, unemployment
 - Weak border control

Trafficking in Slovakia

- Source, destination, transit country
- 150-200 reports of trafficking in 2008
 - Although the numbers are low, it is likely that many more women and children are trafficked through and within Slovakia
- Very few cases prosecuted
- Criminal penalties for trafficking are low
- Not enough prevention in high-risk populations (Roma)

Religious Freedoms

- 2007 – amendment to religious registration law
 - Requires 20,000 signatures of citizens and members of the religion in order to be registered and recognized as official
 - 18 registered religions
- Smaller religious communities (Muslims, Hare Krishna, Scientology) are effectively prohibited from official status
 - No prohibitions on practicing the religion
 - Officially registered religious groups receive state subsidy

Extremism

- What is extremism?
 - Radicalism, advocacy of extreme views
- Neo-Nazis (“skinheads”)
 - Often nationalist, white supremacist groups who are intolerant of ethnic and religious minorities and homosexuality
 - Often celebrate WW2 Slovak state – Nazi puppet regime
- As many as 14 organizations with thousands of sympathizers
 - Slovenska Pospolitost (Slovak Togetherness)

Extremism

- Violence against religious or ethnic groups
- Anti-Roma rallies
 - March against “Roma Terror”
 - Sarisske Michalany, August 2009
 - Called for the expulsion of Roma from the community
- Law to punish extremist acts
 - In 2009, Slovakia passed a law to toughen penalties for extremist crimes.

Minorities

- Popular racism, discrimination, hostilities toward minorities
- Public statements by major government officials
 - Prime Minister Robert Fico promised to “actively effect the irresponsible growth of the Romani population.”
 - SNS Chairman Jan Slota: “The solution to the Gypsy question is an easy one; you need a small yard and a big whip.”
 - Stefan Harabin (then Justice Minister) to opposition MP Daniel Lipsic (who is Jewish): “You remind me of some Nazis who had Jewish ancestry and yet were able to kill innocent children, women, old people in concentration camps, just to prove their loyalty to fascism. What is the difference between Goebbels and Lipsic?”

Minorities

- Slovak National Party (SNS) – Jan Slota
 - June 8, 2006: (about punishment of prostitution): "...those hideous, mostly Gypsies that just stand there... they should simply be beaten..."
 - June 8, 2006: (about homosexuals): "I have no problem with them, if they stay in the shadows and just make their disgusting sexual orgies."
 - June 10, 2005: "If the Slovak nationalist party is extremist, then Hungarians are radioactively extremists, they radiate more than Chernobyl. The best solution would be backfill them with concrete."
 - November 18, 2002: "Minorities terrorize the majority. Everybody [in the world] is fighting terrorism, but here we don't know who or what we are fighting."
 - November 14, 2001: "It is the height of cynicism [to criticize Slovak police for actions against] unadaptable individuals of Gypsy ethnicity."

Minorities - Roma

- Up to 500,000 Roma in Slovakia
- Educational discrimination
 - Disproportionate number of Romani children in schools for mentally disabled children
- Housing discrimination
 - Over 100,000 live in segregated settlements in substandard conditions
 - Forced evictions and relocations
- Employment discrimination
 - Popular stereotypes and lack of equal opportunity

Minorities - Hungarians

- 600,000 ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia
 - Linguistic discrimination
 - Slovak language textbooks in Hungarian schools
 - Language Law
 - Ethnic hatred, violence
 - Ex: Hedvig Malina, 2006 Ethnic Hungarian student assaulted and robbed by skinheads for speaking Hungarian on her cell phone.
- Diplomatic tensions
 - Denial of entry to Hungarian President Laszlo Solyom in 2009

Minorities

- Language law – amended 2009
 - 10% of population is Hungarian speaking
 - Other linguistic minorities: Ukrainian, Romani, Czech, others
 - Insists on parallel use of the “state” language in official contexts of linguistic minorities
 - Health care
 - Education
 - Police
 - Fines of up to 5,000 Euros
 - Concerns:
 - Restrictive and discriminatory against linguistic minorities
 - While the law is intended to preserve Slovak as the “official” state language, it is extremely vague
 - The law could potentially be applied to the private sphere

More information:

- US Dept of State – Annual Country Report on Human Rights
 - www.state.gov
- Amnesty International
 - www.amnesty.org
- Slovak National Center for Human Rights
 - www.snslp.sk
- European Commission against Racism and Intolerance – Slovakia 2009
 - www.coe.int

- This presentation was developed for the Center for Slavic and East European Studies at The Ohio State University by Shannon Potter.